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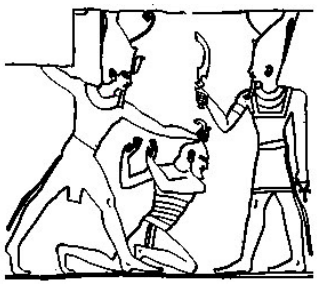

Delta and Sinai
Current research

Aurélia MASSON

Egyptian Naukratis: the early evidence

Naukratis was the earliest known Greek settlement in Egypt and a major bridge between Egypt and many countries of the Mediterranean area during the Late Period. As such, the foreign - and especially Greek - legacy of Naukratis has for a long time retained the attention of scholars, while its Egyptian characteristics and material culture were too often overlooked. This statement is even more conspicuous when the early history of the site is considered. The scope of this paper is to re-assess the issue of the early evidence of the Egyptian presence at Naukratis.

Even though it remains a matter of debate, the presence of Greeks at Naukratis since the late 7th century BC is generally accepted. The question appears however more delicate when it comes to a contemporary, or even earlier, Egyptian presence. Classicists tend to perceive Naukratis as a purely Greek foundation and postpone any Egyptian presence until the Ptolemaic Period. The discriminating selection of the finds during the early exploration of the site is partially responsible for this opinion. Egyptian common ware, which should have formed the bulk of the material was discarded, whereas even the tiniest fragments of decorated or inscribed Greek vase were kept. If Coulson and Leonard tried to apply more modern methods in their investigation of the site between 1977 and 1983, they did not recognise any Egyptian pre-Ptolemaic material. Nonetheless, Egyptian inscriptions - first gathered and analysed by J. Yoyotte – confirm that Egyptians were present in Naukratis at least as early as the 26th dynasty. A few earlier elements may as well indicate an even earlier date.

The current project at the British Museum is engaged in a multidisciplinary approach to the site of Naukratis. It involves a comprehensive study of the surviving finds discovered in the previous archaeological research, as well as a new survey which uses the latest techniques. The Egyptian artefacts, at last brought forward, restore the so far biased view that most scholars had of Naukratis. Finds previously barely discussed and often unknown, such as stone scarabs and scaraboids, can corroborate an early Egyptian presence at the site. They help to re-evaluate the true nature of the material culture of Naukratis during the Late Period and possibly the late Third Intermediate Period.

A discussion on their original archaeological context is certainly needed and diaries of the former archaeologists can prove to be helpful in that matter. At last, the preliminary results of the survey, performed in 2012 and led by Ross Thomas, support a pre-Ptolemaic date for the earliest evidence of Egyptians at Naukratis.